

Curator's Choice

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Collections

An 1830s Sash Buckle

This unusual buckle from the Reynolds Tavern site in Annapolis first crossed my path in 2022 when one of my colleagues asked if I'd seen anything like it (Figure 1). I hadn't, and that had me flustered because buckles occupy a fair amount of space in my mental filing system. Fortunately, I collect antique clothing and accessories as a hobby, so I have experience shopping for this type of thing online!



Figure 1. Gilt sash buckle from Reynolds Tavern in Annapolis (18AP23/840).

It didn't take many search terms before I landed on a similar buckle for sale labeled as a "sash buckle." That example—which I bought, of course, along with five more since—showed what the folding buckle would have looked like when whole (Figure 2). The Reynolds Tavern buckle is missing the spring mechanism that would have kept it closed and the central pin that held the tines. These buckles are highly decorative and meant to be seen, so I've found a lot of examples shown in portraits of women from throughout Europe and the US (Figure 3). The portraits typically date between 1835 and 1840.

Previous decades had women in relatively narrow silhouettes and high-waisted gowns, but waistlines moved down in the 1820s and 1830s as both sleeves and skirts took on more volume. In the 1830s, the trendy waistline for gowns was straight and sat just above the natural waist. Women frequently wore a sash that buckled at the front to accentuate this waistline.

A sash is a strip or loop of cloth fashioned to wear around the waist or over the shoulder, so it's not quite like the belts we use today; the buckle and strip of cloth are not permanently joined, and sashes weren't needed to hold garments up like belts sometimes do. Instead, portraits typically show women wearing sash buckles to fasten a wide ribbon that complements the gown.

In the 1840s, Gothic Revival styles ushered in a craze for deep V-shaped waistlines and wide ribbons did not mesh well with this elongated style. The latest portrait I've found with this buckle is that of 23-year-old Harriet A. Glines of Maine who was painted by her fiancée Johnathan Adams Bartlett in 1841 (Figure 4). Miss Glines wears a narrow ribbon as a waist sash that follows her V-shaped waistline. However, her sash buckle looks out of proportion and appears to have minimal material to hold onto. Her portrait illustrates why this style of sash buckle likely fell out of favor.

I suspect that the Reynolds Tavern sash buckle dates to the end of the trend, because its openwork decoration and slight V-shape has a Gothic Revival look. It might have been an attempt to adapt elongated sash buckles to V-shaped waists. Still, folding sash buckles with a closed front seem to disappear from portraits in the 1840s.



Figure 2. Examples of complete sash buckles like the Reynolds Tavern buckle. All are at least three times longer than they are wide, and all have a hinged fastening mechanism that is hidden by the buckle front when closed.

Private collection of the author.

References Cited

- Carmen Moreno, Marquesa de las Marismas del Gualalquivir, c. 1833. By Francisco Lacom y Fontanet, Spanish painter (1784-1849). Museum of Romanticism, Madrid.
- Mme Augustine Massicot Tanneret, Louisiana, c. 1835. By Jacques Amans, French painter (1801-1888). National Portrait Gallery, Obj. DLR1050.
- Innkeeper Barbara Meyer, c. 1836. By Johann Baptist Reiter, Austrian painter (1813-1890). Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Object ID 2456.
- Josefine Schwartz von Mohrenstern, Vicomtesse Goupy de Quabecq, c. 1837. By Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, Austrian artist (1793-1865). Wien Museum, Inv.-Nr. 43466, CC BY 4.0, Photo by Birgit and Peter Kainz.
- Jeanette Woolley, later Mrs. John Vincent Storm, c. 1838. By Ammi Phillips, American artist (1788-1865). Brooklyn Museum, 69.7.
- Lady with à gigot bouffant sleeves, c. 1836. By August Schoefft, Hungarian painter (1809-1888).
- Harriet A. Glines (later Mrs. Johnathan Adams Bartlett), c. 1841. By Johnathan Adams Bartlett, American (Maine) painter (1817-1893). The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Object No. 1976.100.3.

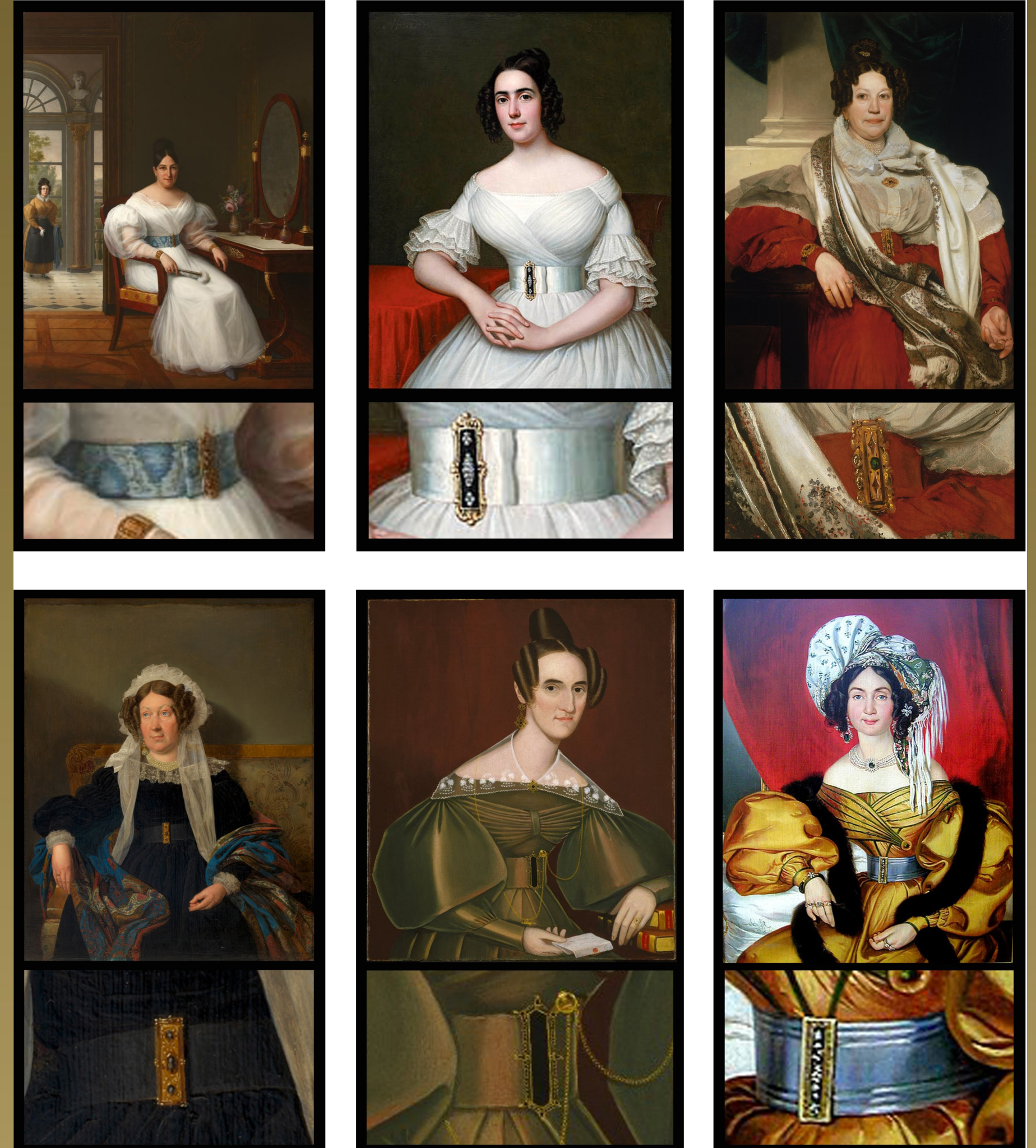


Figure 3. Examples of sash buckles in American and European portraits, including details of the waist. Top left: Carmen Moreno, Marquesa de las Marismas del Gualalquivir, Spain, c. 1833. Top Center: Mme. Augustine Massicot Tanneret, Louisiana. The date is given as c. 1835 by the National Portrait Gallery, but they also list the sitter as being born in 1825. Since this young woman is certainly older than 10 years of age, and she has narrow sleeves more characteristic of the late 1830s, the c. 1835 date seems too early. Top right: Innkeeper Barbara Meyer, Austria, c. 1836. Bottom left: Josefine Schwartz von Mohrenstern, Vicomtesse Goupy de Quabecq, Austria, c. 1837. Bottom center: Jeanette Woolley, American, c. 1838. Bottom right: Lady with gigot sleeves by Hungarian painter August Schoefft, c. 1836.

So far portraits suggest these buckles have a relatively narrow date range. Conservatively, the buckles date to c. 1830-1845, but the majority seem to appear between 1835 and 1840. That makes this type of buckle extremely valuable to archaeologists, because it is diagnostic of a tight time period. The buckle was also a widespread trend, depicted on women of all ages across the Western world. That makes this buckle something that archaeologists call a "horizon," or an artifact type that is widespread, but only for a relatively short period of time. A horizon helps archaeologists assign a date, not just to the buckle, but also the layer of soil where the buckle was recovered and the other artifacts found in association with the buckle. That is always one of the goals in artifact analysis.

Knowing that this style of sash buckle dates to the 1830s is helpful to me as a collector as well. I love that era, but I can't generally afford to buy surviving gowns from the 1830s. Even if I could, they would take up a lot of space. Instead, I can satisfy my love of the decade's fashions by searching for affordable sash buckles that are both beautiful and easily stored. Since I first saw the Reynolds Tavern example, I can't seem to stop looking for these, and I keep adding the ones I can afford to my collection. I love them all!

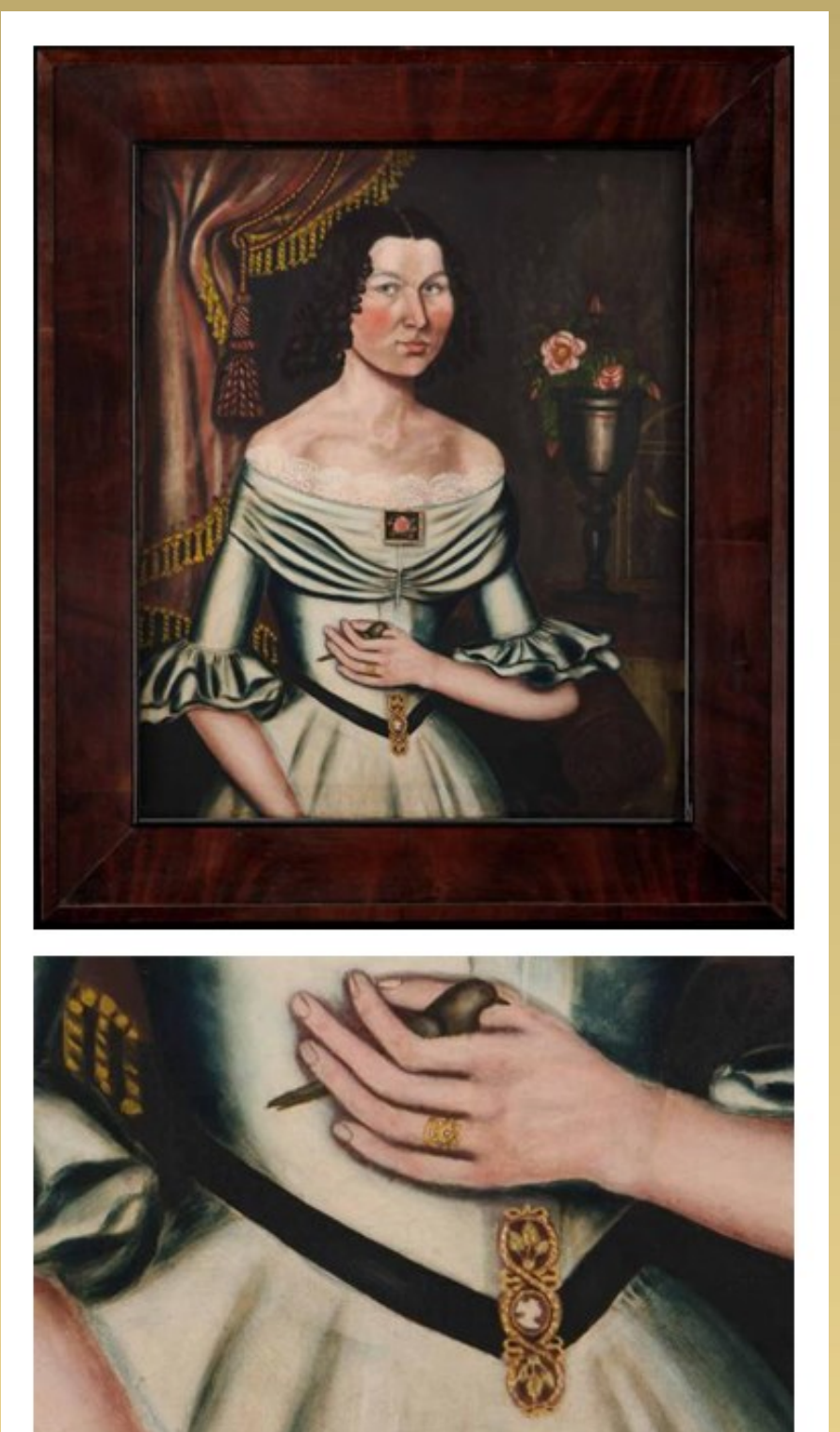


Figure 4. Portrait (and detail of sash) of Harriet A. Glines, later Mrs. Johnathan Adams Bartlett, c. 1841. Painted by Johnathan Adams Bartlett, South Rumford, Maine.

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